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The CIA And A Free Press

CIA Director Stansfield Turner asked for "understanding and support" from the American Society of Newspaper Editors last week and got instead a kick in the shins.

In an appearance at ASNE's annual convention, Admiral Turner restated his policy concerning the use of journalists in intelligence assignments. "We fully share," he said, "the recognition that journalism, religion and academia have a special importance to our country. At the same time we recognize that there may be unusual circumstances in which an individual who is also a member of one of these professions may be used as an agent.... What if we have a terrorist situation and the only way in is through journalists? Those are the kinds of circumstances I mean."

Turner said that in his tenure as director he had personally approved the use of journalists on three separate occasions, but that none of these approvals had been "consummated."

Abe Rosenthal, executive editor of *The New York Times*, expressed shock and dismay. "Do you think it's worthwhile ... to cast into doubt the ethical and professional position of every American correspondent abroad?" he asked.

"What you are saying is that if you accept an assignment from me to get some information that can be very vital to our country, you have lost your freedom," Turner replied. "I don't understand that. If you slant the news because you are on our payroll, that's bad.... But it is your choice whether a relationship with us, providing information to us, somehow profanes your work."

Eugene Patterson of the *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times*, a past president of ASNE, entered the fray and, getting nowhere, said that he would elaborate his position on the editorial pages of his newspaper.

The Miami Herald's John McMullan, in a high dudgeon, said that perhaps he and a few others should have a private session with Turner and give him "a short course in the proper role of a free press."

Come off it, brethren. Perhaps someone should give you a short course in the real world. It is absurd to believe that American correspondents abroad will be viewed as any more or less "safe" repositories of sensitive information should the CIA publicly proclaim a policy of not hiring them, or should the Congress pass a law making that illegal. This is not a question of a CIA-sponsored Disinformation Bureau — we too would find that abhorrent — this is a ques-

tion of whether, in extraordinary circumstances, the U.S. government should be allowed to use journalists as collectors of information.

For a long time now, certainly since Watergate, it has been considered trendy in our profession to denigrate the CIA. It is long past time to remember that, despite all, the CIA is on our — America's — side in what is becoming an increasingly desperate struggle to preserve our way of life, including the high privilege of enjoying a free press.

Earlier this week, *The New York Times* published an editorial treating this subject, as you might expect, from a somewhat different point of view. The editorial was titled, sufficiently sanctimoniously, "Journalists Are Not Spies."

The publishers of the Pentagon Papers apparently make a distinction between spying abroad and spying on one's own government.